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SUBJECT: ABRUZZO EARTHQUAKE-POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS WITH NIAF

REF: Rome 428

¶1. SUMMARY: At the conclusion of a visit by a delegation of the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF), Post proposes moving forward in a public-private partnership with NIAF, focused on education, specifically on the University of Aquila, in response to the earthquake that struck the Abruzzo region of Italy on April 6. NIAF has done considerable work on fund-raising and planning already, and their approach complements and enhances the assets the USG can bring to the effort. END SUMMARY.

¶2. Charge joined NIAF President Joe Del Raso in meetings with the chief of Italian Civil Defense, the Ministers of the Interior and of Culture, and the Prime Minister's Undersecretary April 29 and 30. Italian interlocutors took on board the message that U.S. support may not take the same shape as that of some other countries, i.e. "adopting" one of the 44 cultural monuments published by the Ministry of Cultural Assets. They understood that the U.S. private sector will take a leading role in the raising of funds, and that the USG will do everything it can to support this effort. They also accepted, even welcomed our inclination to direct American support toward the University of Aquila.

¶3. The apparent convergence of interest suggests to us that the most promising way forward is a possible public-private partnership led by NIAF. NIAF has already raised Dollars 400,000 in "spontaneous donations," which average Dollars 79.00. They believe a subsequent targeted fundraising campaign can net a far greater sum. As they have long considered educational exchanges one of their most important activities, they announced this week a program that will allow students from the University of Aquila to finish their studies at certain American universities. (NIAF has already recruited four partner universities and is working with several others.) NIAF President Del Raso says this "living approach" has the best chance of appealing to American donors. The focus on the University of Aquila allows NIAF to include a portion of raised funds toward "bricks and mortar." Though it is by no means clear that this will include the University's main building, which is one of the 44 historic monuments on the GOI's list, it will at least address in part what the GOI considers a priority for foreign support.

¶4. NIAF has heard concerns on the part of potential American donors, and is going to considerable lengths to make sure that none of the donated money will profit organized crime. To that end, the delegation met with the Italian Director of National Police and the Minister of the Interior, and came away satisfied that this concern is taken seriously and being addressed with regard to reconstruction in Abruzzo. The fact that NIAF's Vice Chair Louis Freeh is associated with the earthquake relief effort will also be a reassuring factor to potential American donors in this regard. He is the most prominent member of an advisory committee of four individuals that NIAF has set up to lead their earthquake response effort. The others are former A/S Pat Harrison, former Ambassador to the Vatican Jim Nicholson, and former Italian Ambassador Sergio Vento. They are ready to work with other civil society groups, with the USG, and with the Italians on a coordinated American response.

¶5. What NIAF needs to make this into a public-private partnership is a signal that the USG sees a coordinated approach - with NIAF playing an important role - as the way forward. They will do "whatever it takes," be it an MOU or a joint communique, to make this happen in partnership with the Department. Throughout their visit, the NIAF delegates were at pains to coordinate their message with the Embassy, so that what the Italians heard was consistent. They would be happy to discuss bringing into this effort one or more famous persons to lend weight to the fundraising effort.

¶6. The Charge's visit to Italy's Civil Defense Chief Guido Bertolaso on April 29, and the subsequent tour of the devastation in the sealed-off historic center of Aquila, provided the visiting NIAF delegation access that would otherwise have been difficult for them to attain, especially so soon after the disaster. It was Bertolaso who reacted most warmly to the proposed emphasis on the University of Aquila, referring to its economic importance: "If we are not able to keep the (27,000) students here, Aquila will die." In the subsequent tour of the center of the town, we came close to, but did not reach, the seat of the university, and could not assess how badly damaged it is. NIAF board Secretary John Calvelli considers the University's Aula Magna or main hall, located in a nearby building, as a possible alternative project.

¶7. Palazzo Chigi arranged after the meeting with Undersecretary Gianni Letta a small press event during which NIAF president Del Raso handed over a blow-up of a check for Dollars 400,000. Charge spoke briefly about U.S. commitment to help Abruzzo in the aftermath of this tragedy, adding that the American response would be a long-term effort.

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